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Connecting the generations: Memory, magic, and Harry Potter

Winifred M. Radigan

I didn't make the midnight sale at the bookstore here in New York City. My sister refused to lend me my 12-year-old nephew for the occasion. But early this morning, I bought the fourth Harry Potter book and then spent most of the day reading. I read in the park, where a neighbor asked me about the book and registered her concern that third graders would find this darker tale too much. I read at the hairdresser's, where another customer struck up a conversation about Potter that led to advocacy for disabled students, and my hairdresser shook his head and commented, "How can you read that 700-page book?" I read in the restaurant, where an Irish waitress asked if the books were really that good and explained that she had not yet read them because they were "children's books." By the time I left, we had reviewed her tastes in reading. Finding common ground in C.S. Lewis's Narnia tales, I invited her to read the first page. She'll be buying *The Sorcerer's Stone* (J.K. Rowling, Scholastic, 1997) tomorrow.

I offer anyone who asks the explanation that I am reading the books because of their impact on middle-school-age kids and their appeal to children ages 9 to 15. I explain that I work in professional development, especially literacy, and that I connect kids and teachers to the books. I add that the unabridged taped versions are perfect for "guided reading" and that the Spanish translations introduce many second-language learners to the fad. I quote my conversations with youngsters who love the books and record the overheard comments of parents, such as "We're here to sightsee, and now all she'll want to do is stay inside and read," or "Anything that gets them reading like this is wonderful," or

"We'll read it together tonight." One 12-year-old responded to my question, "How long will it take you to read the book?" by looking at the hefty volume in her hand, pausing, and saying confidently, "One day." I want to say, "Me, too," but I don't.

The truth is, I love Harry Potter, and Hermione and Ron, and the world Rowling has created. I read the books because they are wonderful. I confess I've read the first three books four times already—most recently in a marathon weekend to get ready to pick up the tale in book four. What speaks to me is how the books console that inner child who still longs for her magic to be discovered and nurtured; the child within remembers all the times she stood on the outside of the inner circle. Like Hermione, constantly reading and prone to speaking the unpalatable truth, she was avoided until needed for help with homework. Like Harry, she felt that something was wrong with her, that she didn't belong. Like Ron, she didn't have the money for sleek, new toys of the moment or the current style. Like Nigel, she was clumsy at sports and timid. "Surely, surely," she whispered, "I must be a wizard."

Harry and his pals are old friends. I know them well: how they get in undeserved trouble with Master Snape, for example. I remember clearly being a month short of 6 and newly promoted to the first grade. I stood waiting for my name to be called by Sister. One by one in alphabetical order, she called a child and assigned a seat. When she got to me, she said, "Winifred Radigan. I've heard about you. You're bold." I remember the glad feeling that comment invoked. Knights were bold. Peter Pan was bold. "How does she know?" I wondered, assuming that adults and especially nuns were

somehow all knowing. I stood taller. "Thank you," I said, grinning broadly. As you can well imagine, I sealed my fate. I don't remember the punishment. It might have been to stand in the back corner. It might have been a few sharp raps on my open palms with the ruler. It might even have been tape across my mouth. All were punishments I received with regularity. I do remember that a note went home pinned to my coat. I had "answered back." My rudeness should be punished. My father's advice, "Keep your mouth shut and stay out of trouble," was a lesson I'm still trying to learn.

And what of friendship and quiet courage? The kind of courage to face a bogart—or our own greatest fear. Remember not having enough money for the latest toy or style? Or being too tall, or too clumsy, or having hair that was too bushy?

It is no wonder that Harry appeals across genders, ages, races, and ethnicities. We all have felt left out and misunderstood. We all have had our fears and embarrassments made public. We all have been misunderstood and mocked. We all have had to find the desperate courage to go on. And we all have felt the wonder of things going just right. We have huddled with our friends in laughter and mischief and enjoyed the moment. Rowling deserves every bit of fame and fortune that comes her way. She has touched us all with truth and love. What more could we ask?

Radigan is an administrative assistant superintendent with the New York City Board of Education/Division of Instructional Support (131 Livingston Street, Brooklyn, NY 11201, USA). This article is a response to the September 2000 Literacy, Age, & Generation column by Francis E. Kazemek.

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